

TRAJECTORIES OF LIFE SATISFACTION IN LONG-TERM MARRIAGES

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH AIMS

The protective effects of marriage for well-being and health are well established. Recent research suggests that these effects are conditional upon the quality of the marriage (Carr, Freedman, Cornman, & Schwarz, 2014). However, little is known about the link between marital quality and life satisfaction in long-term marriages and whether it varies with age. Especially in older age, health problems and marital strain could have a negative impact on life satisfaction.

The present research

This study focuses on trajectories of life satisfaction, considering two age groups of happily and unhappily long-term married individuals. It builds up on results from a longitudinal project, where patterns and predictors of well-being are examined.

Aims

- To explore trajectories of life satisfaction over 3 waves (i.e. from t1 to t3) in happily and unhappily married persons of middle and older age.
- To examine the predictive power of intra-personal resources, marital history and socio-demographic variables at t1 on life satisfaction at t3.

Hypotheses

Based on existing research (e.g., Proulx et al., 2007; Margelisch et al., 2015), we expect:

- A decline of life satisfaction in the group of unhappily married individuals over the years, because of the accumulation of stressors and challenges.
- A stable life satisfaction in the group of happily married individuals over the years, because of the protective potential of a good marital quality.
- Marital happiness at t1 remains a significant predictor of life satisfaction and marital stability at t3 even when considering marital stressors, intra-personal resources and demographic variables.

METHODS

Study description and statistical analyses

Data stem from the longitudinal, survey-based study with three measurement points (2012, 2014, 2016), which are a part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research ‘LIVES’ (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation).
Sample: 443 persons (196 men; 247 women), aged 40-92 ($M = 68.07$, $SD = 13.04$) in a long-term first marriage ($M = 42.29$, $SD = 12.67$).
Statistical analyses (ANOVA with repeated measures and hierarchical regression) were carried out with IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0.

Variables/Instruments

Outcome Variable

Life Satisfaction: Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985)

Intrapersonal resources

Resilience: Resilience Scale RS-11 (Wagnild & Young, 1993)

Subjective Health: original item

Marital history

Marital Satisfaction: Marital Satisfaction Inventory revised (Klann et al., 2006)

Marital happiness: original item

Relationship strain: original Item

RESULTS

Trajectories of life satisfaction

Results from the ANOVA (controlled for subjective health), with life satisfaction as the depend variable, revealed a significant effect for group ($F_{3,419} = 30.09$, $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$), but no main effects for time ($F_{2,838} = 1.82$, $p = .16$) or group by time interaction ($F_{6,838} = 1.04$, $p = .40$). The two age groups within the happily and unhappily married showed no significant difference. At all three time points, happily married persons reported higher life satisfaction than unhappily married persons.

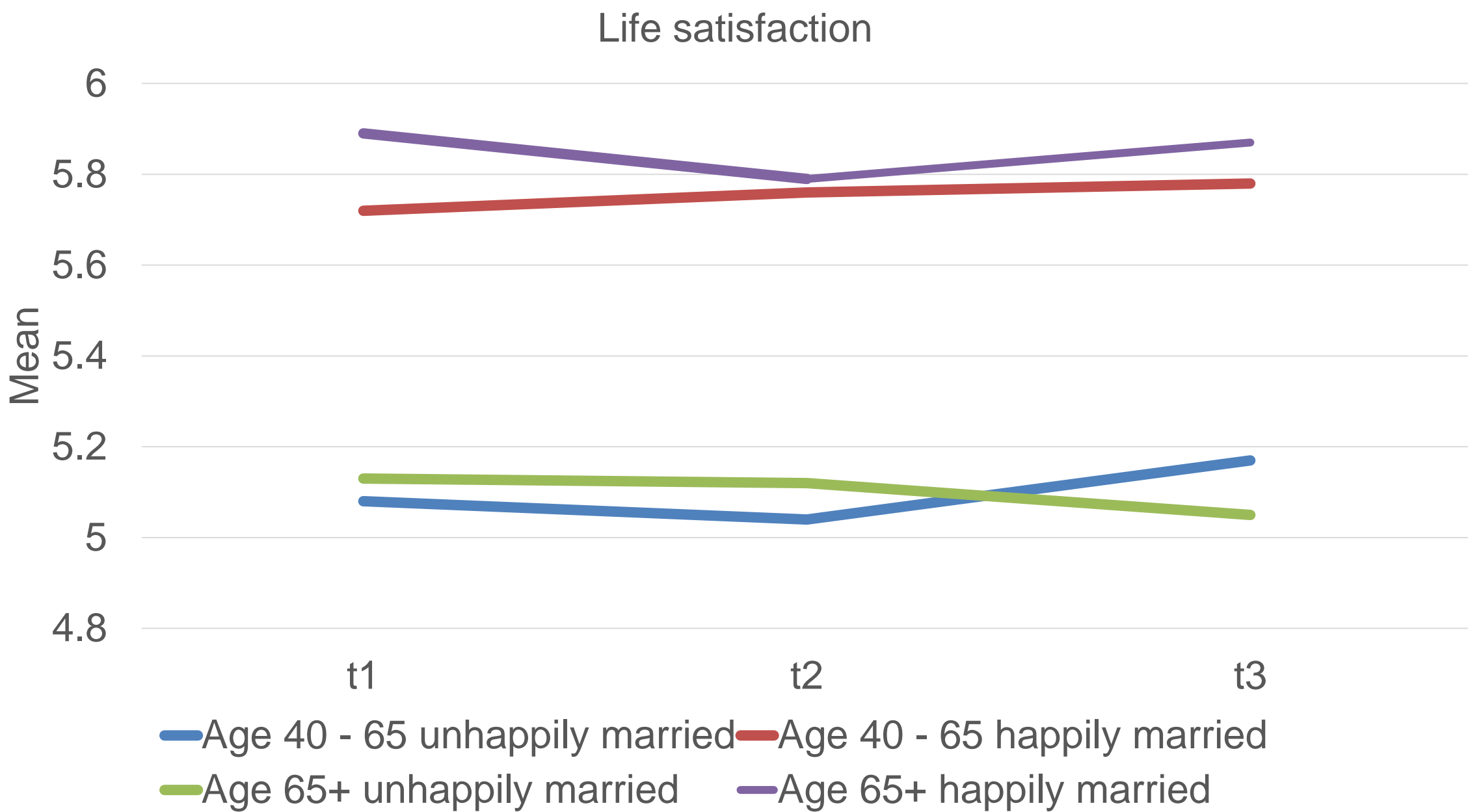


Figure 1. Mean of life satisfaction for T1, T2 and T3.
Note. The individuals were divided into groups of high vs. low marital happiness using a median split.

Predictors of life satisfaction

Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Life Satisfaction.

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Demographic Variables	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Age at T1	-0.004	0.004	-0.058	-0.001	0.004	-0.015	-0.006	0.003	-0.080
Gender (1 female, 2 male)	0.178	0.100	0.089	0.104	0.091	0.520	0.044	0.085	0.022
Financial Situation (1-3)	-0.371	0.111	-0.163**	-0.182	0.103	-0.080	-0.159	0.095	-0.070
Intrapersonal resources									
Subjective Health at T1 (1-5)				0.380	0.058	0.303***	0.321	0.055	0.256***
Resilience (1-7)				0.337	0.066	0.245***	0.254	0.062	0.185***
Marital history									
Happily vs unhappily married (1-2)							0.395	0.093	0.198***
Relationship strain (1-5)							-0.257	0.051	-0.228***
Adjusted R2	0.03			0.21			0.32		
F (Change)	5.15**			22.67***			28.77***		

DISCUSSION

- The trajectories of life satisfaction of the unhappily and the happily long-term married persons remained stable over time: Happily married persons showed higher life satisfaction in comparison with unhappily married persons at all three time points.
- As expected, higher levels of life satisfaction were best predicted by higher values of intrapersonal resources (subjective health and resilience) and marital history (happily married and less relationship strain).
- Our results demonstrate that marital quality in a long-term marriage has far-reaching implications for well-being. When future time horizons of the spouses become more limited and individual's friendship networks diminishes, spouses may grow more co-reliant on each other. Therefore, marital quality plays a significant role on life satisfaction.
- Knowledge about the stable association between marital quality and life satisfaction could be of great help for designing relationship educations interventions (e.g., by promoting strengths of the partnership, improving interaction and effective communication) and by fostering resilience.

References

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